

Global education

Seeking eager scholars from abroad, with a focus on ASEAN

Japan was successfully attracting students from around the world for half a century before the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly applied the brakes. Now the government is ramping up study assistance and other programs to woo them back, appealing to keen learners from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and other regions by using a strategy that's also designed to revitalize Japan itself.

Back in August 1983, Japan laid out a big welcome mat for international students and has been making it bigger and more sophisticated ever since. It set a national goal that year of drawing 100,000 students to its colleges and universities by the beginning of the 21st century. Five years after achieving that tenfold rise in 2003, the country tripled its target to 300,000 by 2020 — exceeding this goal a year early, in 2019.

To realize that lofty 300,000-student goal, the country broke away from its traditional official development assistance concept with a strategy designed to boost university competitiveness, simplify enrollment and immigration, and improve Japanese-language education overseas.

Inherent in the plan, however, was a drive to promote employment among international students and revitalize Japan. A key facet of the 2016 version of the Japan Revitalization Strategy was designed to boost the domestic employment rate of foreign students to 50% from 30%. By 2019, before COVID hit, the figure stood at 47.6%.

Since July 2022, a different aspect of Japan's global policy has focused on the recovery of international student exchanges, which fell drastically during the pandemic from a high of 312,214 to 231,146 that year. The goal is to get study abroad activities back to at least pre-coronavirus levels by 2027, regardless of nationality.

Competition for the hearts, minds and tuition fees of top international students is intense worldwide. Back in 2013, the

government began seriously ramping up Japan's appeal as a study destination, with the greater purpose of encouraging students to settle here, help Japanese companies expand globally, strengthen the country's competitiveness and serve as bridges for facilitating intercultural understanding.

To ensure this happens, Japan's recent policies have evolved to include providing Japanese-language education to international students, supporting promotional measures for each university to establish special programs — including medium- to long-term internships and career education — and issuing certifications based on other aspects, such as schools' track records on corporate collaborations and internship implementation plans. Collaborations with government, academia and local communities are also key.

Cooperative exchanges between universities here and elsewhere have become a priority as well. Following global trends in virtual study abroad programs, Japan is looking to promote and expand the use of online platforms and practices.

Chief among the interactive online practices that Japan is pursuing is Collaborative Online International Learning. COIL promotes international exchanges and virtual collaborations through information and communication technology tools. Students can work on projects in various fields while staying in Japan, learning and collaborating with students at universities overseas. Local companies, governments, economic organizations and other entities are working together on program development.

Japan's relative share of international students in undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs trails other OECD countries. At present, the ratios stand at approximately 3%, 10% and 21%, respectively, all lower than the OECD average.

Effective overseas initiatives have likely made the difference. They include the Turing Plan in the U.K., which provides

special support for students from low-income backgrounds; Germany's Study Bridge, which targets high school grads with strong science, technology, engineering and math results; and Erasmus+, a pan-European program that supports cross-border mobility and collaboration in education, vocational training, youth development and sport. The latter extends to countries and regions outside Europe.

In regard to online offerings, France's Open Classrooms offers free content with individualized instruction, the U.S.-based Coursera Plus plan provides content from participating institutions for a monthly or annual fee, and in February 2022, ASEAN began offering Virtual Exchange plans funded by EU grants to implement VE/COIL at universities in the region.

While COIL should help Japan's numbers, it still has room to grow.

The majority of foreign students in Japan are from elsewhere in Asia, with Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand among the top 10 contributors.

Japan's strong and continuous ties with ASEAN foster the most active people-to-people exchanges. As Japanese companies seek expansion in this region, it's vital for Japan to uphold educational quality, considering each country's unique context. Japan is actively working on building a system to achieve this goal and aims to expand its offerings quantitatively.

While tuition for students studying abroad in countries such as the U.S., Australia and Canada can be up to double what their own students pay, Japan's institutions charge everyone the same. In general, tuition in Japan is also less expensive.

Adding to the appeal of Japan as a study abroad destination — most students say they want to live here and dive into the country's language and culture, with an eye to working in a Japan-related profession in the future — Japan offers solid support programs.



International students in Japan are able to interact with students and instructors from around the world. PEXELS

One such program is the Honors Scholarship for Privately-Financed International Students, which is underwritten by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. It covers universities, graduate schools, junior colleges, technical colleges (for third-year students and above), specialized courses at vocational schools, or educational institutions that have courses that provide preparatory education for entering Japanese universities. The program provides a scholarship to privately financed international stu-

dents scheduled to enroll with pre-arrival admission.

In addition to this, the Japan Student Services Organization offers a monthly stipend of ¥80,000 to a similar range of students. JASSO provides information about studying in Japan, support in finding accommodations, and career advice for those looking to work here. The organization also maintains several offices in Asia, specifically in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and Vietnam, to supply prospective students with information on

Japan-based study programs. With a current intake target of 400,000 international students, Japan will need to supercharge its already attractive offerings to bring in more learners with high aspirations from ASEAN and elsewhere. This initiative is aimed at not only increasing the number of highly skilled human resources, but also retaining them within Japanese companies and communities after graduation, which will contribute to addressing Japan's declining birthrate and fostering diversity for the nation's future.

Sponsored by Osaka Electro-Communication University

Navigating the future via ICT and innovation

Osaka Electro-Communication University is an institution that offers degrees in a wide range of fields, including electrical and electronic engineering, information and communication engineering, medical science, mechanics, architecture, sports, games and media, and computer science, with two campuses in Osaka Prefecture.

"As our name implies, our university was established to train specialized technicians in electrical communications," said OECU President Kuninari Shiota. "Our school's origin dates back to 1925 with the establishment of an electro-communication engineering school around the time laws requiring wireless communication in maritime transport were enacted in response to the Titanic tragedy, and NHK began radio broadcasting in Japan. It was a time when there was domestic and global demand for electro-communication specialists."

Foreseeing the future

In 1961, the school established a university, with just one faculty with one department — the Electronic Engineering Department of the Faculty of Engineering. OECU now offers degrees in 14 departments within four faculties and three graduate schools, all with information education at their core.

The university plans further expansion with the Faculty of Architecture and Design in spring 2024. It aims to leverage its strength in information and communication technology to produce the next generation of

architecture and spatial design specialists by integrating creativity and technology.

"In this fast-paced era of information technology, the demand for specialists constantly evolves. Throughout the decades, we have been aware of the need to adapt to these changes to prepare for the future," Shiota said.

From its early years, OECU has recognized the importance of information education and has actively incorporated it in its curriculum. In recent years, OECU has emphasized the importance of specialized education using ICT and its implementation spans all faculties and departments. ICT applies to all fields, from mechanical engineering to environmental sciences, and its importance cannot be emphasized enough. For example, the medical field utilizes ICT to assess the effectiveness of therapies and develop optimal treatment plans for patients.

In another university-wide initiative, the university launched the Mathematics, Data Science and AI (artificial intelligence) Education Program for all students in 2021, which aligns with the digital transformation of education promoted by the government. "These skills should not be just for those who major in that field but for all students, regardless of their major. It should become fundamental knowledge for everyone in this modern era," Shiota said.

Beyond the classroom

OECU sets itself apart from its academic

counterparts through the pioneering Department of Digital Games, which focuses on both academia and the industry. Established in 2003, this department boasts a cadre of faculty members who are accomplished professionals within the gaming industry, affording students invaluable real-world experience through industry-academia collaborations. Focused on game development, 3D, computer graphics and visual effects, art and design, and game management, this department equips students with comprehensive skill sets that prepare them for competitive careers in the gaming sector.

A testament to their prowess was evident at this year's Tokyo Game Show, one of the world's premier gaming exhibitions, drawing over 243,000 attendees from across the globe. In preparation, students engaged in rigorous evaluations, with faculty members serving as discerning judges, providing feedback on world-building, gameplay and responsiveness. Five select teams were privileged to present at this esteemed venue, captivating over 1,300 attendees, including those in the gaming, advertising and television industries. This experience undoubtedly represents an invaluable steppingstone for budding game developers.

OECU envisions the application of game strategies beyond traditional gaming realms. Shiota noted, "The application, expansion and adaptation of game technology into various facets of society

constitute the essence of 'gamification' — a significant field that our university continues to work on."

For instance, the Faculty of Architecture and Design aspires to equip students with the proficiency to harness ICT for contextually responsive architectural and urban planning, ultimately contributing to realizing a sustainable society. Gamification in conjunction with virtual reality is an innovative and unique avenue for simulating architectural and urban planning dynamics, offering a novel perspective on these domains.

Central to the Department of Digital Games is the Joint Institute for Advanced Multimedia Studies, a pivotal facility facilitating industry-academia collaboration at OECU's Shijonawate Campus. Students enjoy firsthand exposure to industry professionals through active joint research and partnerships with external entities.

The state-of-the-art facilities provided, including an extensive motion capture studio, workrooms catering to video, audio and CG production, and a versatile multipurpose hall capable of accommodating up to 950 people, are operated and managed by industry experts. This on-campus, on-the-job experience allows students an unparalleled opportunity for content creation and fosters valuable experiential learning.

One of the cornerstones of OECU's long-term vision is the internationalization of practical learning. OECU graduates



Osaka Electro-Communication University President Kuninari Shiota

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are poised to enter a globalized workplace characterized by technical documentation and manuals in English, alongside a workforce comprising individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. OECU's approach to internationalization distinguishes itself by emphasizing the cultivation of soft skills encompassing language proficiency and adaptability to empower students to achieve success in a dynamically diversifying work environment.

As an initial step, OECU revamped its International Exchange Center in 2022, strategically relocating the facility to a prominent position on campus. This strategic move has catalyzed increased interaction between the university's domestic and international students, fostering exchange programs with esteemed institutions such as the University of Florida in the United States and Mapua University in the Philippines. In pursuing the university's internationalization goals, OECU plans to broaden its international student enrollment and facilitate outbound student exchange programs.

"We remain resolute in pursuing the institution's guiding principle: 'A University That's Considered Useful to Society Rather Than a University That Stands Out,'" Shiota noted. "It's crucial for the country's future to focus on educating the younger generations, reskilling current employees and internationalizing the workforce. As part of our mission of higher education, we want to tackle these issues head-on. To achieve this, we will continue to evolve as a university, which includes restructuring and modifying our faculties and departments."



Students work on a project at the motion capture studio in the Joint Institute for Advanced Multimedia Studies. OSAKA ELECTRO-COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY



Students and faculty members from the Philippines' Mapua University participate in an OECU tour in July. OSAKA ELECTRO-COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY

Osaka Electro-Communication University

